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O'Hear, EXPERIENCE, EXPLANATION AND FAITH: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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BOOK REVIEWS

Experience, Explanation and Faith: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion, by **Anthony O'Hear**. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 266, xiii. Paper, $10.95.

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In an act of creative inference, Anthony O'Hear concludes from his study of religion that typical religious beliefs, such as belief in the existence of a God, "are not rationally acceptable." This is announced in his introduction to the book, along with a recommendation that "rational men should look beyond religion for the fulfillment of their spiritual needs." The hero of this book is the Buddha who, according to O'Hear, did just that. In the author's own words, which comprise the last sentence of the book:

> The beauty of the Buddha's spirituality is precisely that it is a spirituality without faith, without words, without explanation, and without religion. (251)

This is not, however, a book on Buddhism, an exercise in comparative religion, or an essay on religion and spirituality. It is rather a fairly standard sort of treatise in the philosophy of religion, written in what has come to be known as the broadly analytic style. It is presented, by its subtitle, as an introduction to this field of philosophy. As such, it has some merits. It is fairly clearly written, it attempts an extended argument, linking its various chapters in service to a dominant organizing theme, and it touches on some important topics often neglected in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion. I suspect however that although many philosophers concerned with religious problems will find some of O'Hear's arguments interesting to read, few will find the book suitable for classroom use. For its weaknesses as an introductory text are significant.

The level of exposition is in some ways quite variable. Many sections of the book could be read with interest and understanding by any fairly intelligent and generally educated person. But the philosophical neophyte will hardly be able to retain his equilibrium through, for example, numerous mentions of S5 and Brouwershe systems sprinkled throughout O'Hear's convoluted discussion of the ontological argument. Further, although the general aim of the book is fairly clear, and most paragraphs in its exposition are lucid enough in their own right, the various stages in the overall argument are not sufficiently well marked to keep most introductory students from losing their way. This is especially problematic in a 112 page chapter entitled "Religious Explanations," which seems

to make up the core of the book.

In addition, O'Hear seems to have invested a good deal more energy into his anti-religious rhetoric than into constructing careful arguments to support his claims. His tone is often strident, his characterizations of religion and religious belief tendentious, and his strategy of argument surprising—such that his conclusions are severely underdetermined by the argumentative tactics he employs.

In chapter one, "Faith and Religious Life," O'Hear sketches out some important ways in which religions function in the lives of their adherents, a topic to which he returns in the last chapter. Faith is presented as "an all-encompassing set of attitudes to human life and the world." And religions are depicted as typically providing a framework of beliefs which both explain important features of their world to believers, and endow their individual lives with meaning. Although the discussion here is brief, and is marred by a depreciating tone at times, it is good to see a philosopher giving at least some attention to these elements of religion most often discussed only by sociologists (such as, for example, Peter Berger) and professors of Religious Studies.

Lest he be thought to be endorsing a Wittgensteinian view of religion as a "form of life" in which the activities and attitudes of believers are more central than their beliefs, and the functions of those beliefs more important than their truth-value, O'Hear devotes the bulk of this first chapter to a discussion and critique of Wittgenstein's characterizations of religion. The exposition of Wittgenstein is responsible, and the criticisms well taken, though somewhat standard. It is stressed that religions do make truth claims which can be understood as well as investigated by the uncommitted.

After having established in chapter one the importance of particular beliefs, such as the belief that there is a God, in typical religions, O'Hear goes on in his second chapter to begin the cummulative argument which he thinks will show that standard theistic beliefs cannot withstand rational criticism (for this conclusion, see 249). In chapter two, entitled "Religious Experience and Religious Knowledge," he essays to explore the common claim that central religious beliefs, such as belief in God, are justified rationally by their connection to certain sorts of experience which give rise to them. The focus of his examination is the often drawn parallel between religious experience and sense experience. As we all are justified in taking our sense experience to be for the most part a reliable mode, or set of modes, of information-access to an objective reality existing distinct from such experience, so, the argument goes, religious believers are justified in taking their theistic experiences to yield reliable access to an objective theistic reality—God. O'Hear understands the parallel here to be one between explanatory schemes: As the hypothesis of reliability and the postulation of an objective physical reality is supposed to have explanatory power with respect to the shape of ordinary sense experience, so the hypothesis of reliability and postulation of

a God causally responsible for it is supposed to have explanatory power with respect to the shape of religious experience. His argument then is that the theistic explanatory scheme, unlike the external world scheme, does not satisfy numerous criteria for a good scientific explanatory theory, criteria such as generation of reliable predictions.

It would be hard for any theist to resist the penetrating rejoinder of "If so, so what?" Why should religious beliefs satisfy criteria appropriate to hypotheses purporting to give a certain sort of explanation of the natural in terms of the natural? O'Hear's approach here is reminiscent of the attitude of Richard Taylor toward dualism in his little book *Metaphysics*, where he seems to suggest that I am justified in thinking I have a mind only if the postulation of such an entity in my case would have significant explanatory value for me, and explanatory value of the sort professionally sought after by chemists, physicists, and molecular biologists. I, for one, see no good reason to adopt this attitude. Typical metaphysical beliefs just seem very different from typical hypotheses in the natural sciences. And even within the domain of metaphysics, there is a great deal of difference. For example, theists believe in a causally active individual with whom they may come in contact; no essentialist expects ever to be accosted by an haecceity. Thus the epistemic dynamics of theism and essentialism will be interestingly different from one another, and surely also essentially different from the dynamics of scientific hypotheses.

Aside from such problems concerning the structure of O'Hear's argument, the main shortcoming of this second chapter is his failure to even consider any of the exciting recent work relevant to the connection between religious experience and religious belief being done by such philosophers as William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, Robert Oakes, Gary Gutting, and Nicholas Wolterstroff, among many others. It is safe to say that some of the main implications of this work in religious epistemology bear importantly on our assessment of the status of religious experience. And so a chapter on the topic ignores all of this work to its great detriment.

In the third chapter, "Religion, Truth, and Morality," O'Hear considers the possibility that there is something about the human cognitive endeavor, or the moral enterprise, which requires a postulation or acknowledgement of theism as true. To examine the claim that in our search always to know and understand we are making assumptions which make sense only, or best, within a theistic framework, O'Hear canvasses some of the writings of Rahner, Lonergan, and Kolakowski. He overlooks important contemporary arguments to this effect by Keith Ward, Hugo Meynell, and George Schlesinger, which are all of significant interest. It should be no surprise that O'Hear finds the few arguments he considers uncompelling. In the section on morality, the author presents a fairly standard, brief, and unoriginal discussion of the Euthyphro Dilemma. This involves a very superficial consideration of divine command theories of ethics. The chapter

suffers severely by being uninformed by the important relevant work of Quinn, Wierenga, Mavrodes, Adams, and others. It is not that I expect every introductory text to include a survey of recent literature. The point here and above is rather that even this level text will be lacking in value if its discussions do not take into consideration the best of what has been said on its topics. To conclude the chapter, O'Hear attempts to sketch out a naturalistic foundation for morality, basing it on facts about human psychology and the nature of shared projects. His conclusion is that neither knowledge nor morality points to God.

Chapter four, "Religious Explanations," practically a treatise in itself, examines some of the best known arguments for the existence of God comprising traditional and contemporary natural theology. As if to stress the importance of demonstrative or probabilifying arguments to the rationality of theism, O'Hear begins the chapter by reviewing and rejecting the suggestion made by F. R. Tennant and others that it is acceptable for religion to rest on faith, since science just as much relies on fundamental faith in such assumptions as that, for instance, nature is uniform and induction is reliable. O'Hear attempts to impugn the analogy by insisting that science does not *require* anything like religious faith in uniformity and inductive procedures, a highly tentative and provisional"hope" in these things rather sufficing for successful scientific work. But of course this is a bit weak and hardly to the point. As a matter of fact, the expectations of the average working scientist that uniformity will hold and the induction will work are as strong as any of his other beliefs. And surely he is rational in this, regardless of whether that strength of conviction is strictly required by his science. The rationality of the ordinary convinced scientist does not, of course, render the provisional attitude of the sophisticate O'Hear apparently has in mind irrational. But neither does the presumed rationality of the tentative sophisticate reflect negatively on the average laboratory believer. And this is all a Tennant-style argument really needs.

O'Hear then goes on to consider cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments for the existence of God. One interesting feature of the discussion is that he begins by propounding a quite minimal thesis that rejection of these arguments by a person not already inclined to believe in God is not irrational and not without justification, maintains a correspondingly moderate tone throughout the actual examinations of the arguments, and yet later in his concluding chapter, with no relevant intervening argument to bridge this gap, unveils his overall conclusion that theism cannot withstand rational scrutiny.

In discussing the cosmological and teleological arguments, O'Hear addresses some quite interesting topics, but does not dig deeply enough to provide the sort of fresh insights which are needed at this stage in the discussion of theistic argumentation. One such topic is the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The author does not trouble to inquire into how a consistent theist will understand the

principle, and as a result does not give it the precise sort of formulation it needs. Nor is he very careful in assessing the modal status of the principle. He infers from the fact that it is not inconceivable that within this world there be brute facts to the conclusion that PSR is not a necessary truth. But first of all, as is nowadays quite well known, we must be careful not to conflate psychological questions of conceivability or imaginability with questions of broadly logical necessity and possibility. Further, I think it can be argued that although it is possible to have doubts about the truth-value of PSR (it can seem possible that it be true, possible that it be false), its modal status is such that it is necessarily true or necessarily false. For according to the version of PSR a traditional theist will hold, every contingent physical or natural event, fact, or state of affairs which occurs or obtains will be such that there is a reason why it occurs or obtains, a reason which involves either its direct dependence on God as its cause, or its dependence on some other free-willed agent as its cause, which in turn depends on God as a cause of its existence. The only sort of God on whom all explanations can thus ultimately depend, whose existence can be argumentatively displayed through a use of PSR, will be a God with necessary existence, necessary omnipotence, and necessary omniscience. But then it is impossible that there exist anything independent of the will and causal activity of such a being. And only if something could exist independently of his will, the ultimate ground of the truth of PSR, could PSR be false. Thus, if there is a God, he necessarily exists and PSR is of necessity true. Although I shall not take the space to sketch it here, I think that it also can be argued that only if there is such a God is PSR true. If there is no such God, there necessarily is none, and so PSR is necessarily false. Either way, its modal status is one of necessity.

Another idea O'Hear touches on but does not explore the way it needs exploring is one often relied upon by Swinburne—the idea of prior probabilities for theism and naturalism, and the notion that considerations of theoretical or ontological simplicity are somehow relevant to the assignment of such probabilities. There is a great deal of mystery and some controversy surrounding these ideas nowadays. O'Hear rejects Swinburne's positions, but without, unfortunately, giving much by way of argument for doing so. He chooses rather to rebuff Swinburne's claim that its simplicity endows theism with significant prior probability with little more than the remark that "Not all philosophers of science regard such simplicity as increasing prior probability" (115). But of course, as that notable Renaissance thinker Henrikus Cornelius Agrippa von Nettlesheim was wont to observe, "Philosophers disagree about everything." It is neither very illuminating, nor a very great blow to Swinburne, to point out that some philosophers of science disagree with him. The complex issue of the bearing of simplicity on probability, or for that matter the bearing of probability at all, in such contexts still cries out for elucidation if real progress is to be made in our evaluations of Swinburne-style

arguments.

In his assessment of one form of teleological argument, O'Hear resists what he considers the crucial assumption of the all-pervasive uniformity of order in the universe throughout all space and time by attempting to replace it with the ancient Epicurean hypothesis of the locality of order (not in my mind a real alternative at all). He ends by saying "All we have here are competing intuitions and no means of deciding between them," a modest claim indeed. However, the modesty is short-lived as O'Hear turns his attention to the ontological argument.

He begins his commentary on this fascinating argument, or family of arguments, by announcing that the very idea of an ontological argument "involves a negation of all thought and all intellectual discrimination" (143). According to O'Hear, the ideal of God's being necessary "has a Zen-like effect of mesmerizing those who submit themselves to it," a remark which surely rivals some of the purple prose of which the late John Mackie was capable when being goaded by St. Anselm's discovery. After such an introduction, it is quite disappointing to find O'Hear's actual discussion of the details of the argument somewhat convoluted and for the most part unoriginal. And, again, the discussion is adversely affected by failure to sort out issues of alethic modality from those of conceivability.

One of the strangest features in the book comes to the surface predominently in this chapter. O'Hear seems to think that the only proper conclusion to an ontological or cosmological argument will involve the postulation of a being without determinate attributes, a God of "pure being." The connection of such a conception with these arguments, however, is nearly as big a mystery as the conception itself. While applauding O'Hear's rejection of severely aprophatic theology, I must wonder why in the world he thinks it is even relevant here. He appears to claim, moreover repeatedly, that what anyone who is attracted to the ontological argument is trying to express is the conviction that God's existence is very different from the existence of anything else, and that since the existence of everything else is the existence of a determinate reality characterized by numerous distinct attributes, the conviction being expressed is that God is an indeterminate ground of all determinate reality, himself without discrete properties and thus literally indescribable by any standard linguistic means. O'Hear rightly brands such a view as incoherent. But the inference by which he attributes it to proponents of ontological arguments could not be more patently fallacious. From the conviction that God's existence is in some important ways very different from that of any other reality (e.g. by being absolutely independent ontologically and unconditioned by any deeper ground of existence) it does not follow that it is different in every respect from the existence of other realities, which would of course be impossible.

Likewise, O'Hear seems to think that the cosmological argument requires that

God be an indeterminate, property-less ground of all existence if he is to be a proper stopping-point of explanation, given the relentless press of PSR. The assumption operative here seems to be that any property instantiation requires explanation, and the consequent argument to be that if God had determinate properties, they would require explanation, which could not itself in every case be provided by God. The theist, however, has a number of ways available to him for avoiding the obviously unacceptable conclusion O'Hear attributes to him. The best known involves a claim that only contingently, not necessarily, exemplified properties are such that their exemplification requires explanation. Those of God's properties which comprise his nature and so might be thought to be beyond explanation by his activity, such as his omnipotence, omniscience, and so forth, are not such that their exemplification requires further explanation, according to a properly formulated PSR; and those which do not comprise his nature can be explained by his causal activity. O'Hear does not consider any such possibilities, remaining content to ascribe to proponents of these theistic arguments a clearly absurd view instead.

Chapter five, "Suffering and Evil," is perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most surprising in the book. After considering both the logical and evidential forms of the problem of evil and reviewing some standard theistic responses, O'Hear concludes from his own assessment of the challenge that "the argument against religion from evil and suffering fails" (221). Basically, O'Hear contends that the reality of suffering seems so intimately tied up with the development of a virtuous as well as a rational form of life in the world that it would be extremely hard for any critic of theism to establish with any rational force the claim that a world created by a God could not contain (or most likely would not contain) the sorts and amounts of suffering blighting our world.

It may sound as if O'Hear just endores the well known Virtuous Response, or Soul-Making Theodicy here. But his reasoning is actually interestingly different from such views as standardly propounded by theists. The typical theist's claim is that it is morally justifiable for God to have created an environment in which beings capable of moral freedom can in response to hardship freely attain morally virtuous characters and spiritual qualities which are necessary conditions for partaking in the beatific communion with God which is eternal life, and is the goal for which they are created. O'Hear argues that the conception of heaven standardly offered as a description of the end-state in which soul-making properly culminates actually involves assumptions logically inconsistent with the genuine insights about the intimate connection between suffering and difficulty on the one hand and rational virtuous life on the other. The heavenly state of existence is usually characterized as one utterly devoid of sufferings, frustrations, or difficulties of any kind. O'Hear contends that the link between these negativities and the positive features of human life are such that no recognizably human,

rational existence would be possible in their absence. This is not an altogether new contention, having been suggested in one way or another by other philosophers in recent years, but it is still novel and interesting enough when properly developed to merit further work. The challenge is for theists to display a conception of the ultimate human state of communion with God which is consonant with claims made in the context of the problem of evil. If God's justification in bringing about or allowing certain evils is that they are logically necessary conditions for certain important goods, and heaven lacks those evils, does it not just follow that heaven is devoid of those important goods? This is O'Hear's challenge. Most recent work on the after-life has centered around questions of the possibility of resurrection or disembodied existence. I think that at this juncture theists could move on to consider other problems concerning the after-life, such as those raised by O'Hear, and by such other philosophers as, say, Bernard Williams. We would all benefit from the attempt to delineate models for after-life and to show in some detail what is wrong with the sort of objection exemplified by O'Hear's reasoning.

In the sixth and final chapter of this book, "Religion and the Rational Man," there is an intimation of what may be the main reason O'Hear finds theistic belief rationally unacceptable. It is not so much that he finds theism lacking in the virtues of a good scientific hypothesis, or that he appraises standard theistic arguments as less than compelling, or even that he judges the overall traditional theistic vision of human life as aiming at a blissfull eternity to be problematic, but rather it seems that his negative assessment may turn crucially on what he considers to be the apparent inexplicability of the hidden-ness of God. If there is a God, O'Hear joins many others in asking, why does he not show himself more clearly? Why is this world of ours at best religiously ambiguous to the inquiring observer? Hick's well known response O'Hear finds completely unsatisfactory, and by pressing the point draws our attention to one of the most remarkable problems for religious belief—remarkable in that the degree to which it is treated in contemporary literature in the philosophy of religion seems to stand in an inverse relation to its commonality and importance as a religious problem.

What I am referring to as the hidden-ness of God may be a problem for as many people, believers as well as searching unbelievers, as is the enormity of pain and suffering. In fact, the problem of evil can even be seen as indicating a way in which if there is a God, he is hidden. So what may be the most widely discussed problem in the philosophy of religion may be a version of what in its most general features may be one of the most neglected topics among philosophers working in the field since the writings of Pascal. The value of O'Hear's remarks, which are somewhat sketchy and truncated, lies primarily in the reminder they carry that this is a problem which requires much more direct philosophical attention than it has received.

After a lengthy exposition concerning what he considers the dogmatism and lack of critical attitude in traditional religion, O'Hear wraps up his discussion by saying "My thesis in this chapter has been that religion is essentially dogmatic, fetishistic, and authoritarian; that this aspect of religion is what religion derives its strength from" (249), by, as he has suggested, pandering to the emotional and psychological needs of people. And, not to miss a way of dismissing religion, he adds to his characterization of it as rationally indefensible the claim that in addition "religion (at least in any traditional form) cannot be a force for good at the present" (244), a claim which has in this book just as little argumentative support.

Mysticism and Religious Traditions, ed. by **Steven T. Katz**. Oxford University Press, 1983.

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Professor Katz begins the "Editor's Introduction" to this text with a sketch of what he calls "the predominant scholarly view" concerning the relation between the mystic of a given culture and "the socio-historical, Philosophical-theological" environment provided by the culture in question. According to this view, the mystic is one who has something called "*the* mystical experience" and who then "soars above dogma and community, leaving the sober majority behind to its mechanical, if irrelevant, religious teachings and practices". The mystic's contact with the religious community of which he is a part comes only at the point where he "...must descend from his height and then, caught up again in the fetters of tradition and history, space and time, he must express what is truly inexpressible in the inadequate symbols and syntax of his particular faith community". Given this "common image" (what Katz calls "the "regnant scholarly orthodoxy"), the question arises as to whether it may not be in error. And (Katz tell us) it is this possibility—the possibility that it may be fundamentally mistaken—that (in his words) "has brought the present symposium into being". Speaking of the relation between the mystic and cultural milieu in which the mystic exists, Katz identifies the issue to which the ten essays contained in this volume are (presumably) addressed as follows:

> The essays in this volume have been written in order to reconsider this relational issue afresh with the hope that a more adequate schematization of this dialectical encounter can be arrived at. This is to say, the present essays are attempts to reconsider, in various ways, the question: "What relation(s) does obtain between mystics and the religious com-